

**Testimony of E. Austin Short, III
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On behalf of the National Association of State Foresters**

**Before the House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture**

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Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. On behalf of the National Association of State Foresters, I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify before you today on the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act. NASF is a non-profit organization that represents the directors of the state forestry agencies from the states, U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters restore, manage, and protect state and private forests across the U.S., which together encompass two-thirds of our nation's forests.

The National Association of State Foresters is pleased to support the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act. Every year throughout the United States, forest catastrophes rob society of the clean water, wildlife habitat, wood fiber, beautiful scenery, and many other important values that these lands would otherwise provide. Repairing lands that have been ravaged by fire, hurricanes, ice storms, and other disasters must occur as quickly as possible to minimize these losses. This bill offers improvements that will speed the implementation of recovery projects following such events and authorizes badly needed research in support of these efforts.

We are very encouraged to see language in the bill recognizing that these events can occur across large-scale landscapes, and that the ensuing restoration work needs to be coordinated across all involved ownerships. It is of particular concern to State Foresters that too often the lack of recovery work on federal lands creates additional threats for adjoining state and private lands, all of which have been impacted by the same disaster. The inclusion of landscape assessment efforts across all ownerships, as well as a focus on the preparation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans, will provide needed emphasis on restoration and protection for all lands.

I would like to point out just a few examples of how we have to deal with forest recovery treatments at a landscape level if we are going to be responsible caretakers for the nation's overall sustainable forest resource.

When an ice storm causes widespread damage to trees, the affected region frequently sees a buildup in harmful insect populations and forest diseases when pathogens find weakened, ice-broken hosts that are primed for invasion. If any particular landowner is slow to bring their forest back to a healthy condition, their land becomes the center for

this forest pest buildup. Eventually the insects and pathogens will move from the damaged, un-restored forests to surrounding healthy forests. In these instances, landowners who worked diligently to restore their lands will be harmed by the lack of action on the part of their neighbors.

In January of 1998 a record-shattering ice storm hit northern Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont. The impact to the forest landscape was staggering: Seventeen million acres of forestland in these four states were damaged by accumulation of ice up to three inches, and five million acres experienced severe damage. Total natural resource loss estimates exceeded \$1 billion. Landowners and foresters were confronted with the possible spread of insects and diseases among the damaged forests, as well as the potential for severe wildfires due to the downed debris. In May of that year, Congress appropriated \$48 million for assistance to Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont for recovery from the January ice storms. These funds were delivered to private landowners through existing programs which focused on damage assessment, long-term recovery plans, tree planting, and fuel reduction. Salvage operations to reduce insect, disease, and fire threats were initiated following damage assessments. The ability of the states, landowners, and the private sector to move quickly kept the insect and disease outbreaks and wildfire danger to a minimum.

In my state of Delaware, we dealt with our own severe ice storm in February of 1994, which affected nearly one third of the state's forestland. The majority of the affected forests were privately owned, with about 15-20 percent in public ownership. My agency secured \$15,000 from FEMA's Disaster Assistance Program to reduce the severe fire danger on State Forest lands by quickly clearing firebreaks and access roads. Our staff also provided technical assistance to private landowners to salvage damaged timber and reforest these areas, thereby minimizing the risk of future forest pest infestations and wildfires.

At this very moment in the southern United States, there is a growing danger of catastrophic fire due to the huge volumes of downed woody material left in the wake of hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. Any landowner who is unable or unwilling to act quickly to clean up these ravaged lands is contributing to this risk. And once the fire starts – regardless of the ownership – the flames know no boundary. Federal land managers in the Gulf States know they must move quickly to address the substantial buildup of downed trees and reforest these areas quickly to prevent large wildfires and the danger of soil erosion. We fear the current federal review process may delay restoration activities until after damage from wildfire, insects and diseases, and soil erosion has occurred and has spread to adjacent state and private land.

For a number of years now federal lands in the western United States have experienced an increasing number of very large fires. Only a small percentage of these lands has received treatments to restore and revegetate the burned forestland effectively. In this case, the lands are characterized by large volumes of dead wood and large expanses of highly volatile brush that persist for many years. The likelihood of a re-burn in these areas – often as difficult to control as the original fire – is very high. Accompanying this

high likelihood of yet another catastrophic fire is, again, the attendant risk to any adjacent landowner.

The state of Washington has both rigorous regulation through its Forest Practices Act and a high occurrence of catastrophic wildfire. The state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has established a strong track record of completing post-fire salvage and restoration efforts quickly, while following Washington's strict harvest regulations. The DNR is able to expedite the approval process of forest practice applications to ensure the work can start on time. In many cases, harvest plans can be approved in as little as two to three weeks following a fire. Completion of the salvage sale and the harvest of dead and dying trees often begin six to nine months after the fire is extinguished. Work begun more than 12 months after a fire is often much less effective, as insects and fungi have begun to degrade and decompose much of the remaining timber. Washington State DNR is able to ensure both restoration work and environmental review are completed in a timely and efficient manner. State Foresters believe federal land managers need to have this ability as well.

For the Forest Service and BLM to perform as responsible neighbors and good stewards over the large estate of federally owned lands in the U.S., they must be able to deal with these disasters quickly and effectively. In recognition of the fact that these catastrophes do not stop at any single boundary line, we need to be able to deal with restoration issues across the various levels of government. Acknowledging that the body of scientific research available on the subject of forest recovery after major catastrophes is limited, we also need to better capitalize on the learning opportunities that may present themselves when such disasters occur. NASF is pleased to see the research component within this legislation to help address our needs.

While federal forest managers are often constrained by process and regulations, state and private forest managers are often constrained by funding availability. The ability to move quickly to treat private lands is virtually useless if adequate funding is not available. State Foresters are pleased to see several funding sources addressed in the bill. Of particular interest is the ability of the Secretary to use FEMA funding in federally declared disaster areas to restore forests on non-federal lands.

We appreciate the measures that are proposed in this legislation and look forward to helping in whatever way we can to promote its passage. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.